

Did You Know.... By Clem Dougherty

The Rise of San Francisco as the Queen City of the Pacific

Did You Know...that the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacramento located at the corner of 11th and K Sts. Sacramento, CA was built mainly with silver money from Virginia City? Yes, it's true. In our last newsletter we saw how William Ralston and the Bank of California used the money from the silver mines of Virginia City to build San Francisco. But just as the influence of Ralston and the Bank faded as the result of his untimely death and the run on the Bank in the early 1870s, a new group came center stage. They were the four Bonanza Kings: John Mackay, James Fair, William O'Brien, and James Flood. All of them came to California in the Gold Rush, and when silver was discovered in Nevada in the early 1860s, they turned their attention to the silver mines. The four of them held the majority shares in the Consolidated Virginia and California mines located at Virginia City. They also held the San Francisco–Virginia City connection together in that Mackay and Fair stayed at Virginia City providing hands-on management of the mines, while Flood and O'Brien remained in San Francisco managing the interests of the four on the Mining Exchange. The partnership was extremely successful in that each of the four became multi-millionaires enjoying the mine profits that have been described as follows: "incomparably the richest strike of precious metals in mining history," "riches unparalleled in the 14 year history of the Comstock," "the top had been pried off Nature's treasure vault," "the richest hoard of gold and silver that had ever dazzled the eyes of a treasure seeker," and "the wealthiest and most powerful mining combine ever seen in the West." (see Lewis, Oscar, *The Silver Kings*, 1986 ed., pp.45,141,223, and authorities cited therein)



John Mackay 1831-1902

Of the four Bonanza Kings, the most interesting is John Mackay (pronounced: "Mack-ee"). Born in Ireland on November 28, 1831, Mackay came to California in 1851 to strike it rich in the Gold Rush. He panned for gold on the Yuba River, and failing to make it big in California, moved to Nevada in 1860. He met James Fair in Virginia City and while Mackay's business career soon became legend (at one point he made \$10,000 a day), it was Mackay's private life that attracts our attention today. While in Virginia City, he met Marie Hungerford Bryant, a young widow with a small child, Eva, by a prior marriage. Marie taught French in a local Virginia City school and also sewed for wealthy patrons in order to make extra money. It was Mackay who rescued Marie from a life of genteel poverty by marrying her in a ceremony performed by Fr. Patrick Manogue, pastor of St. Mary's of the Mountains in Virginia City and later first Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Sacramento. It didn't take Marie long to discover the good fortune (literally) she had married into. After the

birth of their first child John, the family including Mackay, Marie, John, Marie's parents, and her sister took a trip to Europe where Marie decided that Virginia City was too noisy, dusty, and crude. She preferred to live in Europe, and so she did. Leaving Mackay

behind in

Virginia City, Marie in 1876 moved herself, her children (by now a second son Clarence was born) her parents and her daughter Eva to Paris where she remained for most of the next 25 years, returning to the US only once.

In Paris Marie purchased for a million francs a four story mansion which occupied an entire square just off the Champs-Elysees, adjacent to the Arc de Triomphe and spent another 1/4 million francs to furnish it. Marie then set out to bring into her home European aristocrats, statesmen, musicians, singers, painters, sculptors, authors – the crème de la crème of European society. Money attracts, and Marie soon attracted all of Paris to her home. Marie was the first very rich

American to exile herself to Europe. Her expenses were enormous, and Mackay dutifully, and without complaint, paid them all.

In the meantime Mackay divided his time between San Francisco where he stayed at the Palace Hotel and Virginia City where he stayed at the International Hotel. He did not have a permanent home. Mackay lived a spartan existence and denied himself any type of luxury. He reportedly gave away over \$5 million dollars to people in need on the condition that his gift was to be anonymous. At one point there came a slack period when the Virginia City mines shut down for a while throwing hundreds of miners out of work. Mackay paid the entire grocery bill for all the miners unable to pay the bill themselves. People lined up in the streets in hopes that Mackay would pass by and give them a hand-out, and hand-outs he gave. There was such a dramatic difference between the lavishness of Marie's lifestyle and the simplicity of Mackay's lifestyle. Mackay despised his wife's new found European friends, and when he visited her once a year in Europe, he could not wait to return home to Virginia City and San Francisco.

There is a Sacramento connection with John Mackay. Mackay

and Bishop Patrick Manoque were good friends, having known one another when both lived in Virginia City. When Manoque became Bishop of the Diocese of Sacramento in the 1880s, he built the present Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament. It was John Mackay who contributed a major portion of the funds needed to build the Cathedral. In other words it was silver money from Nevada that built the Cathedral. Just how much Mackay contributed, no one knows because Mackay wanted all his gifts to be anonymous. Today if you walk to the inside of the Cathedral on the south side, look up and you will see a stained glass window donated by St. Mary's of the Mountains of Virginia City. It's probably a good bet that the stained glass window is actually the gift of John Mackay.

On July 20, 1902 Mackay died of heart failure in London while on a business trip. He was 70 years old. He and the other three bonanza kings had kept the San Francisco / Virginia City connection together. In reviewing Mackay's life there is a certain nobility of character in John Mackay -- not because he was one of the richest men of his age but of the manner in which he lived his life. He certainly knew who he was and put that knowledge into practice: a simple man at heart, genuine, unassuming, and true to himself. A Class Act.

(Sources: Lewis, Oscar, Silver Kings, 1986 edition, pp.47-114; Fisher, Vardis and Holmes, Opal L., Gold Rushes and Mining Camps of the Early American West, pp.370-374 Breault, S. J. William, The Miner Was A Bishop, pp 108-109, 132; Rawls, James and Bean Walter, California, An Interpretive History, 9th edition, pp.189-190)